

Teach It, Tell It, Read It: A Teacher's Legacy Lives On

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 6, 2026)

Steve Reddick is a retired Oak Ridge Social Studies teacher who has worked as a Holocaust educator at Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning and as a Teacher Fellow for the Tennessee Holocaust Commission and Facing History and Ourselves. He is also a member of the Mira Kimmelman Legacy Committee. Dr. Tess Lefmann was a student in his 8th grade American History class in the late 1990s. The following article is based on a 2022 email Tess wrote to Mira Kimmelman's sons, Benno and Gene, and an email interview with her old teacher.

You will learn from Steve's interview with the daughter of our well-known friends, Sheila and Jim Michel. I am proud to know them and count them as friends and volunteers in many endeavors in Oak Ridge.

Simply put, Oak Ridge Holocaust survivor Mira Kimmelman's testimony is *still* changing lives.

Just ask Dr. Tess Lefmann, Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Mississippi.

Tess, the eldest daughter of Oak Ridge residents Sheila and Jim Michel, is a 2002 graduate of Oak Ridge High School. As a sixth-grade student in Martha Deaderick's Social Studies class at Jefferson Middle School, she sat spellbound in the darkened school auditorium as Mrs. Kimmelman described in detail her experiences surviving the grueling conditions in the deadly Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp and her liberation from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in April, 1945.

"This is not a happy or nice story, but it is the truth and it must be told," Kimmelman began.

"I was paralyzed in my seat listening as she spoke," Tess writes, "and after that day, my life changed. As a 12-year-old, I simply could not understand genocide and the roots of such evil. I wanted to understand why social injustices continued to exist in the present. Learning about the Holocaust became my route to figuring out the world and who I was in it.

"I read Mrs. Kimmelman's *Echoes from the Holocaust* memoir twice that year. I read Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. I was only twelve, but I was transfixed. I was impressionable, and Mrs. Kimmelman gave me a gift: she taught me to speak the truth, to be brave in the face of adversity, and to question my role in the world."

Tess recounted these experiences in a 2022 email that she sent to Mira Kimmelman's sons, Benno and Gene, following an *Oak Ridger* article by Kay Brookshire that described the newly created '*Mira Kimmelman: Learning from the Holocaust*' contest which was established by her two sons after their mother's death in April 2019. Now in its fifth year, the '*Learning from the Holocaust*' contest is open to public, private, and home school students at the middle and high school levels throughout Tennessee.

The contest is organized and administered by the Mira Kimmelman Legacy Committee, which consists of Benno and Gene Kimmelman, Oak Ridger Ronnie Bogard, and local Holocaust educators, including Dr. Julie Kinder-McMillan of Robertsville Middle School, Dr. Sheila Morton of Oak Ridge High School, and Darrell Schwartz of Roane County High School.

Mira Kimmelman's lessons continued to shape Tess's life after she graduated from Oak Ridge High School. "It was your mother's story that drove me to want better for our world," she wrote to Benno and Gene, "or at least be someone in it trying to chip away at some of the systemic injustices that lead to inequities. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but I knew I was fascinated by the human spirit and all it is capable of. In college, I majored in psychology and minored in history. I took every WWII history course that was offered. My junior year, I spent a semester abroad in Italy. While there, I flew to Poland and

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spent four days walking the grounds of Auschwitz. It was a solitary and contemplative experience like few I have ever had.

"I wanted to go, not to understand, but to bear witness. I traveled alone, without any understanding of the language, written or spoken, so the trip unfolded in near silence, which felt fitting for the introspective nature of the trip. At Auschwitz, I joined a guided tour, but I remember almost none of what was said. The words couldn't compete with the weight of the place.

"What I remember most is the vastness of the place, the open land where so much was destroyed in an attempt to hide the crime. The emptiness itself speaks. So many lives passed through there, were reduced to numbers, and then extinguished. Standing there, I thought of Mira's time at Auschwitz and felt baffled by her story as only one. One life, fully lived, among millions of others just as complete.

"What stays with me are the objects, the ordinary things left behind in unimaginable quantity: silverware, shoes, and most of all, the human hair. Each strand once belonged to someone who brushed it, washed it, expected to keep living. The hair made the loss intimate, unbearable in its quietness. In those remnants, the vastness of Auschwitz narrowed into something painfully small and human.

"I left understanding that to bear witness is not to comprehend the whole, but to remember that every life there was complete, ordinary, and irreplaceable. It was an experience I will carry with me always."

Following her graduation from Duquesne University, Tess worked as a Residential Program Counselor for adolescent girls at Peninsula Village, before embarking on her graduate career in the College of Social Work at UT-Knoxville. "One of the courses in my doctoral program was a Teaching Pedagogy class in which we were to design a course and create a syllabus. I designed mine around the implications of the Holocaust for social workers.

"Learning through survivors like Mira made me realize how critical it is for social workers to understand how helping professionals can become complicit in systemic harm when ethics are subordinated to policy or bureaucracy, and how moral courage can make a life-changing difference.

"So, I designed a course focused on connecting social work's core values (service, justice, dignity, relationships, integrity, and competence) to historical examples within the Holocaust...the purpose being to teach social workers how to recognize complicity, resist dehumanizing systems, respond ethically under pressure, and honor the dignity of vulnerable populations."

While working on the assignment, Tess spoke directly to Mira Kimmelman "for advice and to get her thoughts... she was incredibly generous with her time, her story, and her blessings. What I remember most was her remarkable willingness to help, seemingly at any cost. She was both a messenger and a catalyst for change, and speaking with her only reinforced that in my mind.

"I remember effusively praising how wonderful I thought she was, and she seemed completely uninterested in flattery. She was on the phone for a purpose, and that was not it! That honesty and focus felt so real, just as she had always seemed, and it left a lasting impression on me."

Mrs. Kimmelman's focus on understanding and fighting injustice and inequities directly shaped Tess's doctoral research on the "Effects of Prenatal Stress and Poverty on Fetal Growth." While at UT, she also completed a fellowship with the Urban Child Institute in Memphis that focused on conditions affecting neurocognitive development and learning in early childhood.

Known affectionately to her students as "Dr. Tess," she began teaching at Ole Miss in 2015, where she is a popular professor who has taught courses in the Department of Social Work and across several other

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departments. Along the way, she has created three courses of her own: "Foundations in Maternal and Child Health," "The Social Construction of Motherhood," and "Below the Line: Perceptions of Poverty." On February 20 of this year, Tess was a featured speaker on a soon-to-be released TedX program on which she discussed, 'Why Environment Matters More Than You Think.'

Tess's ongoing investigative research focuses on the "social determinants of health that impact disparities along the reproductive-perinatal continuum... (including) early childhood development, breastfeeding, and access to reproductive health care." This research regularly takes her beyond the classroom into community health centers in the Mississippi Delta region and other rural areas, and the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) in Jackson, Mississippi. In each setting, she focuses on encouraging, supporting, and educating young mothers in pre- and post-natal topics such as blood pressure monitoring, healthy nutrition and cooking, and breastfeeding.

Equally important is Tess's other social justice work outside the classroom. She serves as a Confidential Advocate for the university's Office of Confidential Advocacy, Support, and Education. In that role, she supports students "in the crises that follow interpersonal violence of varying kinds (e.g., during evidence collection at the hospital, statements given to university or community investigators, relocation to safe housing, filing charges in court, etc.), and to ensure that they are protected throughout under Title IX. "

Tess says that this work "feels relevant and meaningfully connected to my role as a social worker and my desire to create more equitable spaces to support wellbeing." She also serves on the executive committee of the local chapter of United Campus Workers of Mississippi, a "wall-to-wall union currently focused on ensuring that all workers have a living wage and fair housing." In recent years, her advocacy work has led to her involvement in political campaigns to elect officials with a social justice focus.

When asked about the challenges of teaching at a university in today's political climate, Tess writes, "Being in the poorest state in the union, among the highest proportion of African Americans, with a pervasive reminder of our sordid past in current culture and legislation, I have grown as a social worker and become more fervently committed to social justice initiatives... As an accredited social work program, we are required to teach certain competencies that have allowed me to speak to things that might otherwise be seen as questionable and/or silenced. I would be lying if I was to say I haven't been afraid and uncertain many times, but I continue to find goodness where there's dark and that's what I choose to hold on to.

"What keeps me motivated is a deep belief in humanity and in the idea that good ultimately triumphs, even when the path feels long and uneven. Mississippi so often receives a bad rap in the press and in popular narratives, yet it is an incredibly resilient place, full of people quietly and persistently working toward something better. There is a profound strength here; so much care, creativity, and commitment happening in communities that rarely receive recognition. We have our battles, absolutely, but we also have real wins, and those deserve to be named and celebrated.

"I find daily motivation in my students, who continue to surprise me with their willingness to sit with discomfort, ask hard questions, and imagine alternatives to the world as it is."

Tess's greatest motivation lies in her two young children: "I teach them the same things that Mira Kimmelman instilled in me: to speak the truth, to be brave in the face of adversity, and to question their role in the world. (They) remind me that the next generation not only wants better and more but is prepared to work for it with honesty and courage."

Coming full circle back to that darkened auditorium at Jefferson Middle School and Mira's Kimmelman's impact on her, Tess says, "I often hear Mira's voice in my head and heart, especially in moments when I need to act with honesty and courage. I think of the way she stood before my 6th grade class and shared

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the most intimate, harrowing details of her life during the Holocaust. We, as young adolescents, developmentally wired to squirm, joke, and tune out, were compelled to listen because of the raw honesty and intentional framing of her words. She entrusted us with the hardest parts of her life so that we could become more compassionate, more aware, and more willing to act. That example has never left me.

"In my own classroom, when I teach about the stark realities of health disparities and the systems that perpetuate them, I hear Mira's guidance: demand attention, hold space for discomfort, and invite transformation. I strive to embody her strength, ensuring that my students are not just listening, but truly ready to hear and to carry that understanding into action...

"When I think of what must have sustained Mira, and so many others who endured the unimaginable, I am reminded that even in the darkest circumstances, people have found reasons to keep going, connections to one another, a sense of responsibility to the future, and the quiet insistence that life, dignity, and meaning still matter. That legacy challenges me to keep looking for what is life-giving, to keep showing up, and to believe that hope is not passive optimism, but an active, daily choice."

In both her professional and personal life, Tess Lefmann embodies Mira Kimmelman's parting words in *"Echoes from the Holocaust"*: "The Holocaust is a lesson in human (and inhumane) history that took place because of hate, bigotry, indifference—all characteristics that know no bounds. These traits spread like wildfire. If we remain indifferent to human suffering, it can happen again; it can happen here, and who knows who the next victims will be? Only by remembering the bitter lesson of Hitler's legacy can we hope it will never be repeated. Teach it, tell it, read it."

Thank you, Tess, for doing *exactly* that.

Afterword: The history and implications of the Holocaust are currently taught at Oak Ridge High School, Roane County High School, and other high schools across Tennessee in a state-approved elective called *Holocaust and Human Behavior*, a curriculum designed by Facing History and Ourselves. At the middle school level in Oak Ridge and elsewhere, the Holocaust is often introduced through novels and guided units in individual teachers' English Language Arts and Social Studies classes. Participants in the Mira Kimmelman 'Learning from the Holocaust' contest are often students in these classes. The contest is open to secondary-level public, private and home school students across the state. Contest information can be found at mklegacycontest@gmail.com.

Mira Kimmelman initiated a Holocaust Remembrance Program at the Jewish Congregation of Oak Ridge (JCOR) for her students over 40 years ago. Her legacy continues in what is now a community-wide Holocaust Remembrance Program that will be held this year on Sunday, April 19th at 3 PM at JCOR, 101 W. Madison Lane, Oak Ridge.

Thanks, Steve! WOW, what a powerful testimony! You have captured the essence of what it means to really focus on the needs of youth at hand and by letting Tess express it so eloquently Historically Speaking readers were given insight that otherwise might never have been available to them! The holocaust was horrible and cannot be forgotten, else as Mira said, it could even happen again...and that must never be.

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Steve Reddick (Courtesy of Steve Reddick)



Dr. Tess Lefmann – daughter of Sheila and Jim Michel (Courtesy of Tess Lefmann)

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Tess giving her TedX talk (Courtesy of Tess Lefmann)